

Great Vigil of Easter 2017

Genesis 1:1-2:4a  
Exodus 14:10-31  
Matthew 28:1-10

If our faith is a story,  
As we claim,  
Then it is not a story for the faint of heart.

It is a story where joy and terror are intermingled.  
A story where the holy,  
The beyond,  
The more,  
The infinite source of love  
Is always breaking into our closed and guarded lives  
To bring forth hope, healing, renewal.

Breaking in at the dawn of creation  
to call us forth from the formless void  
into a good and fruitful world.  
Breaking in at the moment of exodus  
To call us forth from slavery and oppression  
Into freedom and responsibility.  
Breaking in with prophetic promise  
To call us forth from exile  
And gather us together as one people  
United in gratitude and joy.

God is always breaking in  
And offering us a new life,  
New ways of being, becoming, belonging.

This is cause for rejoicing –  
And it is terrifying.  
God is always offering us change –  
Change that we can only embrace  
If we summon all our courage.

It is a fearful thing,  
As scripture tells us,  
To fall into the hands of the living God.

In the great story of scripture  
There is no event more fearful  
Than the arrival of an angel

Bringing a message from God.

Don't be afraid,  
Says the angel to Mary.  
Don't be afraid,  
God wants you to bring the divine  
Into the world.

Don't be afraid,  
Says the angel to the shepherds.  
God wants you to go bear witness  
To the divine  
Appearing in the most unlikely of places.

Don't be afraid,  
Says the angel to the grieving women at the tomb.  
Jesus who was crucified  
Has been raised.

Don't be afraid?  
The coming of this angel from heaven  
Is so cataclysmic that it sets off an earthquake.  
How would they not be afraid?

The joyful news an angel brings  
Is always fearful.

This joyful news most of all.  
Jesus died on the cross,  
And was laid in a tomb  
Carved out of the rock,  
With a stone rolled across the entrance.

When the women came to see the place,  
The earth shook,  
The stone was rolled aside,  
And they discovered he was not there.

What really happened?  
And where?  
Where was, where is the empty tomb  
That is so essential to our faith?  
We cannot know.

If you go to Jerusalem,  
Deep underground

In the dark places of an ancient church,  
You can see tombs carved in the rock,  
Tombs from the time of Jesus,  
Probably just like the tomb where he lay.

A few would claim  
That one of these is really his tomb.

But in the wide open spaces of that vast and ancient church,  
There is a shrine,  
Like a little church nestled inside the great church.  
Not ancient, but ornate.  
Not graceful, but impressive.

Some traditions claim  
It marks the place  
Where the tomb of Jesus lay.

And then, a mile away,  
Outside the walls of the old city,  
There is a tomb in a garden.

Some would have it  
That this is where Jesus lay,  
Even though all the evidence shows  
That his tomb had been empty  
For a thousand years  
Before this one was carved from the rock.

Where is the empty tomb?  
No one knows.

But this truth is at the heart of our faith:  
Somewhere, probably now underground,  
Almost certainly never to be found,  
Is the place where Jesus lay.

Somewhere in Jerusalem,  
In the real,  
Touchable, visible real world  
Still weary and sad with the same sorrows,  
Is the place where Jesus lay.

It matters that there was a tomb,  
And that, though he was dead,  
The tomb was found to be empty,

And he is alive.  
He is not there.

It matters that this happened in time,  
To a real human being.

But now it happens just as surely here  
As it did so long ago and far away.

The place is no longer the place.  
Wherever the faithful gather in his name  
And proclaim that his life and love  
Are stronger than death,  
The tomb of Jesus is empty  
And he is alive.

This is where the earthquake happens now.  
This is where the fearful angel rolls away the stone,  
And sits on it.

This is where the angel of God  
Says to us,  
As we gaze in fear and wonder,  
Don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid.  
The world is still sad and weary,  
But it is utterly different.  
Changed forever.

Jesus changed the world in his dying,  
Bringing love to the place of death.  
That was the deepest mystery the world had known.  
It was a fearful thing;  
The earth shook  
And the curtain of the temple was torn in two.  
Everything was changed.

That was the beginning.

And then,  
Another earthquake,  
And a mystery deeper still.

The love Jesus brought to the place of death  
Broke death apart.

God is always breaking into the dark, cold, closed places  
Of our lives  
And bringing forth something new.  
The breaking open of death is the ultimate event  
In the story of love.

It happened once,  
Somewhere.

And now it happens  
Whenever we let it be so.

The angel is always coming down from heaven,  
Setting off an earthquake,  
Rolling aside the heavy stone  
That keeps us trapped,  
And saying, don't be afraid.

Don't be afraid.  
The message of the angel is for you now.

Go, and tell those who have not heard the news  
That he is alive and goes on ahead of us,  
Back out into a world  
That is closed and dark and weary and sad,  
Breaking into that world  
With healing and liberation  
And love.

This moment at the tomb happened once,  
Long ago and far away,  
But that was only the beginning.  
Now it happens everywhere, always.  
It can happen here.

Don't be afraid.